



reanimation

demo magazine

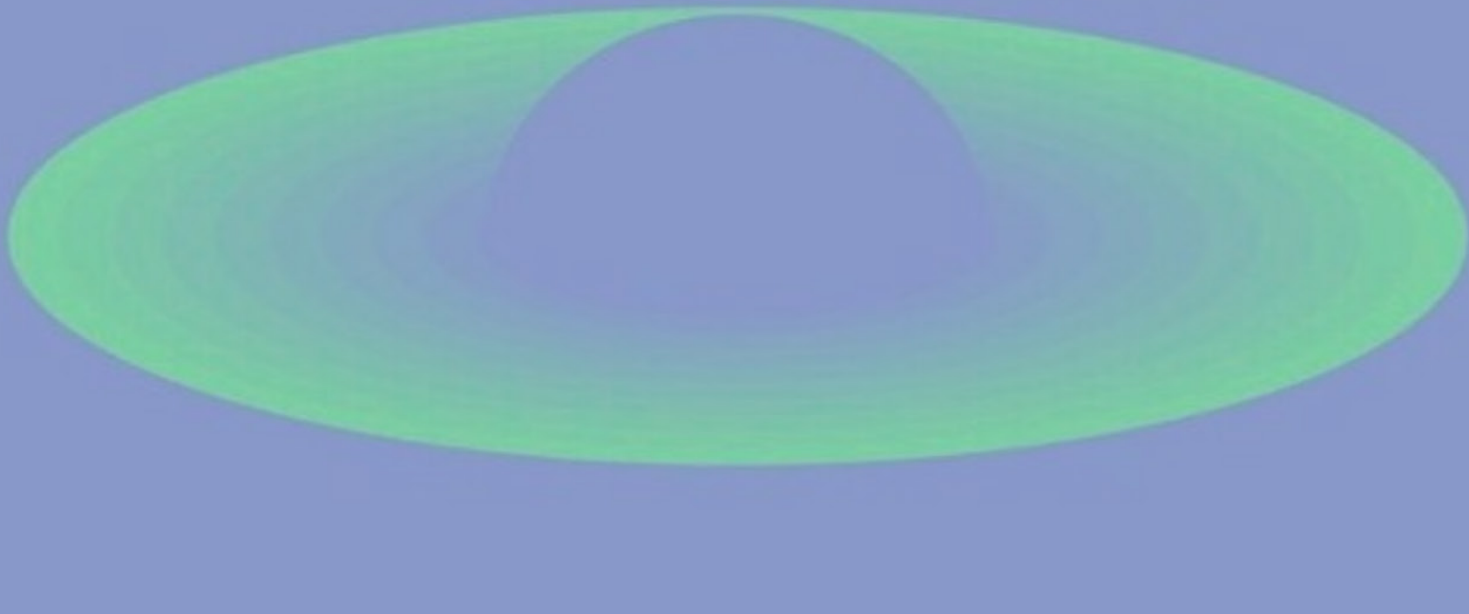
SUMMER 2022 / ISSUE NO. 18



re-an-i-ma-tion

/ˌrɪːˌæniˈmeɪʃ(ə)n/

to animate or become animated again: to bring back to life or to come back to life. To regain vitality or to restore vigor and zest.



The music industry came to a standstill during the first wave of COVID-19 in early 2020. Tours and albums were postponed, and postponed again (Read: Justin Bieber, The Deftones, Bob Dylan, BTS). Concerts went online, live shows were held on Instagram, and even if we were only ever watching to begin with, the digital audience that we became was muffling. Slowly we got used to how sharing music has changed, and we're showing more appreciation for the live music and venues we missed and took for granted. COVID-19 is still in flux, but we're moving again, and sharing with one another. Artists have come out of hiatus, bands have broken up, and we've seen debut albums in a period where there was little more to do than critique or obsess.

It's awkward and it's clunky getting back into it, but thank god we're moving again.

Venues in Toronto that have paved the way for local talent for decades are gone. The Boat, AllyCatz, and The Matador have shuttered their doors quietly and with no more ceremony than a lengthy post on Facebook. In their place, we're seeing the return of El Mocambo, the Silver Dollar Lounge, and History (Drake's venue baby). We're seeing a shift in how artists share music online and what it means to see something 'live'.

WELCOME TO OUR **SUMMER 2022** ISSUE OF ***DEMO.***

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notes from the editors

In my fourth and final year at U of T, being given the co-editorship position has Demo again both new and exciting, a sentiment my co-editor Marina and I have hoped to capture in this issue.

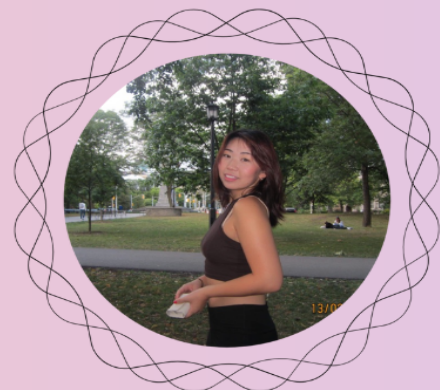
In the span of two years we've seen concerts go virtual, artist hiatuses end, and the spirit of music endure COVID.

We're at the beginning of the end of this now, and this issue explores the return to motion after being in suspension for so long. Demo's 'Reanimation' explores the metal scene left behind by Meatloaf's passing, the redefinition of bluegrass by Billy Strings, and the revival of Tumblr with all its tunes and nostalgia (to mention a few).

New co-editors, a new host of writers, and new designers have Demo too, reanimated. Thank you so much Marina, I'm so lucky to have the best co-editor and this was only as much fun and a success with your attentiveness and love for music. Thank you to the wonderful Zain and Charlie for entrusting us with carrying on the legacy of Demo, and thank you Marco for always lending an ear and your help throughout the process.

As quickly as I've gotten used to this music writing and editing business I'm signing-off, but in the very good hands of Aya and Sarah: I'm so excited for where you'll take Demo next.

Very Best,
Eram Lee,
Co-Editor in Chief



When my co-editor Eram and I started thinking about this year's theme, we both immediately agreed on the concept of a fresh start, a new beginning, a brand new leaf. It almost felt like it was the only option... we felt that this concept was calling for us.

The 2021-2022 school year has felt like a new beginning for so many of us. Getting to see friends in-person and seeing the world slowly open up has felt truly momentous. We picked things up, dusted off our shoes, and began to reanimate our lives.

What I think is really neat about the issue this year is how close we stuck to the theme! Many of the pieces in the magazine are about revival (e.g. of an artist, genre). The wonderful designers also used many bold colors and visuals that feel like a wakening jolt to our eyes. Plus, Demo will be hosting a launch party for the first time in three years (!) in June. Everything about this issue exudes **reanimation**, and I love that.

I would like to say a huge thank you to my co-editor Eram for being such an amazing and enthusiastic creative partner throughout this endeavor! Thank you to Marco for guiding us through every step of the way. Thank you to the writers and designers for making this magazine come to life. And last but not least, thank you to Charlie and Zain for trusting us with Demo.

Best,
Marina Ogawa,
Co-Editor-in-Chief



EMO IS BACK

A Love Letter to Mainstream Emo's Lesser-Known, Distant Cousin, Midwest Emo.

AYA KOBAYASHI

**"Emo is back,
and it is here to stay."**

Many millennials who have had the displeasure of flat ironing their hair until the split ends burned or worn eyeliner the size of a raccoon's eye bags often look back at their years of teenage angst in nostalgic shame. The emo subculture has always been divisive—with people either picturing the fond memories of playing My Chemical Romance on full blast in their MP3 Players or a moody tween who spends way too much time fishing for sympathy compliments on MySpace. Emo was a subject of ridicule in its heyday, and talks of a "National Emo Kid Beatdown Day" made headlines in the news. Popular pop-punk bands often associated with the genre rejected the label due to mass media scrutiny, and music critics often left scathing reviews on anything branded along the lines of shallow teenage emotional angst.

However, it is difficult to deny the lasting impact of what was supposed to be a mere fad. Artists such as Billie Eilish and Olivia Rodrigo both take inspiration from the emo subculture through their music and aesthetics. "good 4 u" had the twangy, distorted guitar and powerful vocals that takes people back to Paramore's "Misery Business" and Eilish's dark, yet neon looks pay homage to every emo kid's obsession with Manic Panic hair dye. Hit show Euphoria also writes its love letter to emo with Jules' fashion choices—and now, the When We Were Young festival trends all over social media upon announcement.

Illustrations by Adela Hua

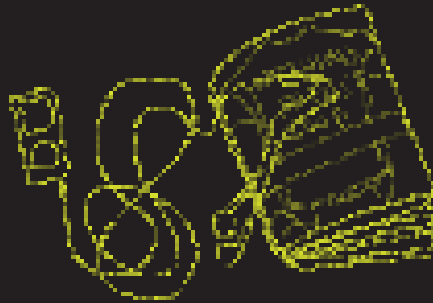
The festival was initially advertised as a single-day fever dream, but demands for an extension resulted in the addition of two more dates in its schedule. With prominent mainstream emo figures such as My Chemical Romance, Paramore, and Avril Lavigne headlining the event, the star-studded lineup had revived what many millennials today pushed down into their memory lanes as a simple phase. New artists such as former Tiktok eboys jxdn and Lil' Huddy also secured a spot in the lineup with their own rendition of "emo revival." The poster that was shared all over Instagram stories of former emo kids resembled the mishmash of bright, yet edgy colors in a black backdrop that could only be described as a call back to the Warped tour posters that every teenager back then kept in their rooms. In a sense, this is a chance for adults to buy their own tickets to a very expensive vacation to Las Vegas, since these very adults often had to beg their parents to buy tickets and drive them to Warped tour.

Although the safety and logistics of the festival are being called into question—with some referring to it as the second "Fyre Festival"—there is no denying that nostalgia is a big marketing factor to the festival's anticipated success. However, although *When We Were Young* advertises itself as an overpriced package deal to a trip down memory lane, the festival fails to pay homage to or mention the bands that arguably solidified—and diversified—the emo sound.

Although *When We Were Young* advertises itself as an overpriced package deal to a trip down memory lane, the festival fails to pay homage to or mention the bands that arguably solidified—and diversified—the emo sound.

What was originally known as "emocore," i.e., "emotional hardcore," began in the 1980s among the Washington hardcore punk circles. Bands such as Minor Threat and Fugazi weaved in angry, anti-government slam poetry on top of distorted power chords on the guitar. This movement was later refined in a period known as "revolution summer," which offered bands such as Rites of Spring and Embrace a chance to delve away from politics to take their music to a more emotional, melodic direction. The rather lyrical nature of these bands' songs was often scrutinized by the glam rock, dad metal hyper-masculinity that was popular during the time. Their audience was small, but devoted, mirroring the parasocial devotion that many emo kids

had with their favorite bands. The fashion statements of these hardcore punk circles also started the all-black, messy home dye jobs that came to define sulky teenagers in the early 2000s.



The branching-out of emo takes listeners to interesting and diverse subgenres that loosely fall under the subculture's umbrella term. Weezer had successfully coined the term "Nerd Rock" due to their combination of angsty, emotional lyrics with nerdy pastimes such as playing with X-men figurines in garages. Screamo bands such as Bring Me the Horizon and Black Veil Brides offered teenagers an outlet to vent out their anger in the form of guttural, borderline animalistic cries and monologues of never fitting in anywhere.

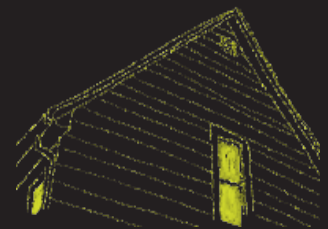
Then, there is Midwest Emo. The label itself is confusing, since many bands that are often under the label host a myriad of different tunes. Beginning in the 1990s in college dormitories and garages, the underground movement quickly gained a cult following over the years. Greenwald, in his book *Nothing Feels Good: Punk Rock, Teenagers, and Emo*, described the Midwest Emo genre as the defining musical movement that founded many of the stereotypes associated with the emo phase today, such as being "overly-sensitive" and taking oneself way too seriously. Being known as an emo also came with a meek timidity that was embodied in the forefront of Midwest Emo artists who often sang about unrequited love and a lack of courage in relationships. Prominent bands include American Football, who were the progenitors of the soft, mellow, and mathematically confusing melodies that characterize the rise of instrumentally driven, yet musically complex songs of YouTubers such as Ichika Nito. Mineral's airy, whimsically whispered lyrics drowned in mellow guitar licks remind listeners of the typical "soft, then loud, then soft again," approach that the Pixies popularized in their music. The band that is often known as the godfather of the emo subculture, Sunny Day Real Estate, is also roped into the Midwest Emo label despite being formed in Washington. Unlike the mild, soft tones of

American Football and Mineral, Sunny Day Real Estate fully embodies teenage angst into music. Driven by upbeat, rich drum fills and the distorted overdrive of an electric guitar, most of Sunny Day's songs often border the fine line between singing and screaming. *Texas is the Reason* and *Dismemberment Plan* attempt to fuse both the soft, jazzy melodic arpeggios of American Football with hardcore punk elements of heavy power chords and a grating vocal timbre.

While "emo" when being used to describe music often led critics to label bands and musical acts as "whiny, tween garbage," it is the rise of such transparent, emotional vulnerability into the lyrical prose and musical progression amongst the earlier "emocore" bands that made a lasting impact into the future generations. Although this is a cultural double-edged sword that leads to toxic teenage communities that popularized the self-diagnosis of mental illnesses and eating disorders, there is no denying that without emo, current Gen Z-ers wouldn't have the camaraderie of sticking together and joking about the macabre as a coping mechanism for the constant doom written in news headlines.

In a sense, emo music always acted as a guide to those who often had a hard time grasping how they were feeling.

The desire to escape to a romanticized version of the past is understandable, and it is possible to do so without having to pay almost \$500 for a three-day festival of reliving mainstream emo in Las Vegas. The beauty of Midwest Emo is how all their songs manage to transport listeners to a cozy, wholesome, yet bittersweet sadness within the tiny speakers of deeply plugged earbuds. Especially in a time of isolation, the constant revival of emo has helped many adults and teenagers alike get through their own emotional journeys of self-discovery and eventual emotional stability throughout the pandemic. In a sense, emo music always acted as a guide or aid to those who often had a hard time grasping how they were feeling at any given moment. If you need a form of comfort through the embrace of relatable vulnerability, then perhaps it is time for you to grab a pair and sink into American Football's LP1 or Jets to Brazil's *Orange Rhyming Dictionary* to feel and resonate with singers' failed love stories and solemnly wistful words.



The Day Disco Came Back to Life

Fizzah Mansoor

In the late 70s, dance-oriented disco was one of the most popular musical genres in the United States, and found its footing in clubs in New York and Philadelphia, particularly in gay communities. Themes of joy, free love, passion, sex, lust, and admiration prominent in disco coupled with the Black and Brown faces of the genre made it a refuge for the downtrodden; it seeped into the mainstream from club floors only after it was co-opted by white culture, culminating in the wildly inaccurate dance film *Saturday Night Fever* (1978)- the movie indicated a shift in demographics that would eventually lead to disco's downfall.

A year later after *Saturday Night Fever's* release, the descent of disco came to a crescendo; at a White Sox game in Chicago, a prominent anti-disco activist and radio DJ Steve Dahl promoted an event that promised reduced fares for spectators that would bring a disco record to be blown up. The event was a rousing success; an audience of 50000 (mostly white and male) showed up to watch the destruction, and caused a stampede and brawl in the stadium grounds that resulted in 39 arrests and serious damage to property, and a story fit for national TV. *Disco Demolition Night* served as a catalyst to the end of a fad; despite its sudden boom in popularity, disco was still largely associated with marginalized communities that had fostered its initial growth.

Disco's musical tropes—the rhythmic heartbeat, the octave-jumping bass, the swooping violins—continually suffuse pop, though they do tend to make themselves more overt every few years. In the post-pandemic world, however, disco permeated popular music in the West in a way it hadn't done since its heyday in the 70s. Doja Cat's *Hot Pink*, the Weeknd's *After Hours*, Dua Lipa's *Future Nostalgia*, Jessie Ware's *What's Your Pleasure?* And Kylie Minogue's *Disco* all drew heavily from the genre. Since 2021, TikTok has been dominated by audios and samples of some of the most iconic disco sounds of the past (Rod Stewart's *Do Ya Think I'm Sexy?* and Boney M's *Rasputin*, among others). So, we must ask ourselves: where was this love for a genre that had only recently been tossed aside as derivative, inauthentic and debauched coming from?

It started, as it usually does, with Daft Punk.

In 2013, the French electronic-music duo released *Random Access Memories*, one of the most successful albums of the past decade. Conceptually, RAM was on-brand for Daft Punk: playful electronica that yearns for sincerity while maintaining its sense of humor. RAM brought something new to the mainstream, as every previous Daft Punk album had: it brought back disco. The singles "Give Life Back to Music", "Giorgio by Morodor", "Lose Yourself to Dance" and "Get Lucky" are all pure disco; The rest of the album features disco legends Nile Rodgers (of Chic fame) and Giorgio Morodor (who speaks the lyrics on "Giorgio by Morodor"), along with a slew of more contemporary artists including Julian Casablancas, Pharrell Williams and Panda Bear, who join in to give testament to the core of disco: love, and the celebration of all its forms.

Yet, despite the core principle of the genre remaining relatively stagnant through the decades, there have been definite changes to its form; further exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic and associated lockdowns, disco is no longer limited to the club. It permeates the mainstream and acts as a reminder of the life of both simple and frivolous pleasures that have been taken from us- the lyrics of modern disco-pop artists are less about we're having a good time, right now, and more about we used to have fun- when will we have it again? The revival is on-the-nose in its aesthetics and subversive at its core; the sacrifice and harassment faced by the marginalized communities at the heart of disco culture in the 70s has been repackaged into pure entertainment for the masses, and the artists pushing this new wave

It is important to note that the decline of disco in the early 80s was not a worldwide phenomenon; in the pre-internet era, it was exported slowly through tapes and records towards the East. Bursting with the promise of American wealth and culture, disco was translated, stretched, readapted and reimagined to reflect the youth culture across Africa, the Middle East, South and East Asia. Despite its vastly different reinterpretations across diverse communities, disco never quite lost its relevance and became an inflection point across regions, an import from the States and Western Europe that retained its allure across the decades. Discostan, a record label, performance space and radio show based in LA, began as a look into this trans-national allure of the music; -stan is a suffix that indicates state, land of, belonging, nation- according to founder Arshia Haq, the nation of Disco is (in contrast to the rigid and violent borders of the post-colonial, post cold-war states where disco still holds immense relevance and popularity) fluid and all-accepting, committed to the idea of belonging through shared sonic experience and of these shared sonic experiences being outlets of devotion.

There is a point to all this, I promise: on February 15th, Indian composer Bappi Lahiri passed away. Exactly six days later, during a reading-week escape to my parents' house in Pakistan, the sounds of one of Lahiri's most iconic hits (*Jimmy Jimmy* from 1982's *Disco Dancer*, which was also sampled by MIA on an eponymous track from her 2007 album *Kala*) blared through the neighborhood from a wedding reception held in someone's backyard, accompanied by shouts of recognition and appreciation- celebration is synonymous with disco, in this part of the world. Lahiri's influence and legacy is not limited to South Asia; his soundtrack to the 1982 masterpiece *Disco Dancer* continues to have cultural relevance in China, the Middle East, Turkey, Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union.

All of Lahiri's (and countless other composers through the ages) talent and dedication to the craft and the ethos of the genre, to culminate in one night of celebration this writer observed from afar; disco is back, because it never really went away. Disco is back, because it deserves to be; disco is back because who wouldn't want to celebrate after getting through the past two years still intact, and still hungry for love?

An Attempt to Bring Meat Loaf Back From the Dead

By Nicholas Leiper

Oh wow...
Okay...
This is happening...

I drunkenly pitched a feature-length article about Meatloaf and now, a full two weeks after my deadline, I am attempting to bring Meatloaf back from the dead. Objects in the Rear View Mirror May Appear Closer Than They Are is blasting as I try and figure out what exactly it means to resurrect Meatloaf. And yes, all twelve words make up the ten-minute and 15-second song's title.

What form of satanic magic must I embrace? To what gods of sex, drums, and rock n' roll must I pray? How many years of my life will this cost me?

Fuck it... here goes nothing.

Lullabies and a Runaway Dream

Some of my earliest memories feature the yellow truck-patterned walls of my childhood bedroom and my dad's shaky ex-choirboy croon. These are memories so old, I can't even place them in the timeline of my life. If I had to guess, they seem to line up with an early fixation on a toy fire-fighter helmet, and the first time I caught a fish. Somehow, the tune is still hyper-familiar to me. I can remember it like nothing else, it was Meat Loaf's Bat Out of Hell.

When I think about it, I'm pretty sure I can recite the lyrics better than the alphabet or any of my multiplication tables for that matter. Certainly, my karaoke rendition of it beats my chicken-scratch handwriting and my arts and crafts skills. Bat Out of Hell seems to be inexorably intertwined with my neural network. As though, my dad's nightly cover set weaved its way into my soft skull and hardened into some vague deification of Meat Loaf's music.

I figure if I'm to embark on this fool's errand, I should try and examine what Jungian pre-dilection convinced me any of this was a good idea in the first place. Sure, it's one thing to hear something over and over when you're a kid, but it's another to still feel it in your bones when you're a mostly functional 21 year old. Bat Out of Hell still makes me jump out of my seat and belt at the top of my lungs. It's anthemic to me, all 7 minutes, and I can cue every drum hit and piano roll of its two-minute instrumental opening as well.

Most of Meat Loaf's songs have that effect on me, and I don't think it's just my early exposure to it. I can't be alone in this reaction. There's something there that speaks to the runaways and the dreamers. Somehow, Meat Loaf could give you a ten-minute ballad and keep you hooked for every heart palpating, gut-wrenching, soul-defining second.

Who is the Magnificent Mr. Loaf?

Michael 'Meat Loaf' Aday, was born Marvin Aday in 1951, but some claim he was actually born in '47. He changed his name at 24 to Michael. It was a sort of rebirth, escaping a name that haunted him on account of it's association with a Levi's commercial that claimed "fat marvin can't fit into jeans." It seems Meat Loaf's whole life was marked by a struggle with how he was perceived. It's hard to imagine being an obese pre-teen with an abusive father in the '60s was a healthy growing environment for a young man. His music sort of reflects this outcast feeling. In the video for I Would Do Anything For Love, he dons the garb of a monster. In Objects in the Rear View Mirror May Be Closer Than They Appear, we see an older Meat Loaf watching stories of youth unfold as an outside observer. He almost longs for something he never seemed to have.

Still, there's a duality there. He wears a lot of scars, but they only seem to make him stronger. As though all the stones that have been tossed at him throughout his life have made him into some incomprehensible being of rock n' roll superstardom. It's almost impossible to deny his commanding stage presence. With his fists clenched so tight, you'd swear his finger would break through his palms, his movements were imbued with lightning as he single handedly drove a solar system of electric guitars and pianos around him. His voice which rung out like and encompassed like it was one with the wind.

He was Appollo before his hard rock herd, but it was all an act. His titanic personas were all just imitations of the sun. There might be something remarkable in that.

"I can't sing at all! It sounds terrible until I put the scene together. [...] On any record I've ever done, you've never heard Meat Loaf sing a song. They've all been characters."

He said in a 2016 interview.

Like the rest of us, he was just a human, struggling with stage anxiety and a whole host of other complexities throughout his whole life, even passing out during a performance. He was also, pardon me for speaking ill of the dead, but a fucking idiot, denying both climate change and the global pandemic up until he himself died of COVID last year.

I can't really do the math here. How can Eddie from Rocky Horror, a counter-culture icon who sang songs for those of us who just want to runaway from a world that isn't quite right, have believed such terrible things? Maybe we shouldn't never turn a discography into a god.

Perhaps then, it's the time to return to my stated goal. The Meat Loaf I want back never left. It's on every record that so artfully smacks you in the face with uproarious drums and wailing guitars. It's in the back of his throat and in the words of almost every song. In that sense, maybe Meat Loaf is a feeling. Meat Loaf is knowing you don't belong, but going on anyways. It's about being the most always and never breaking who you are, even jumping out of hell on a motorcycle because to do so.

I don't miss Michael Aday, I don't think many people do. But I do miss Meat Loaf, the juggernaut who produced anthem after anthem with twelve-word titles and elaborate plotlines. I think sometimes we all need a bit of that in our lives - a little bit of the most and a lot of heart.

that gum you like is coming back in style.

// Zain Ahmad //

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#on the tumblr revival and the cyclical nature
of nostalgia #aesthetic #grunge

1,822 notes

© Illustration by Shaadia Rimzy



In September 2021, after an album cycle marred by repeated delays and controversy, Lana Del Rey released her new single Arcadia. “Listen to it like you listened to Video Games,” she instructed her followers over Instagram, indicating that she would be shifting away from the folk-inspired sound of her previous album, Chemtrails Over the Country Club, instead harkening back to the sound of her earlier works. A stripped back, piano driven ballad, Arcadia could almost be viewed as Video Games 2.0, ruminating upon the same themes of love, desire, and loss. The album to which it belongs, 2021’s Blue Banisters, similarly mines from the singer’s past: the latter half of the album is comprised of several outtakes from 2014’s Ultraviolence. Of the two albums she released in 2021, it comes as no surprise that Blue Banisters was met with a warmer response from audiences and critics alike — “Blue Banisters is the better Lana Del Rey record of 2021,” the AV Club proclaimed, while several users on platforms such as Twitter and Tik Tok remarked that she was making her comeback, reclaiming her title as the Internet’s resident Sad Girl.

That same month, the song Bubblegum Bitch by the artist formerly known as Marina and the Diamonds from her 2012 album Electra Heart would go viral on Tik Tok as well, and a month later, Taylor Swift would shatter records with the re-recording of her 2012 album Red. On Tik Tok, the hashtag #2014Tumblr has accumulated over 151.4M views, with users emulating the soft-grunge aesthetics of the era — jean jackets, black dresses, cigarettes, and images edited with soft filters are proliferating through the app to the extent that this January, Vogue declared that “the 2014 Tumblr girl is back”.

It appears that people everywhere are longing for the past, cycling through the trends of various eras at an increasingly quickening pace. The Y2K revival was in full swing last year, rearticulating the aesthetics of sites such as Myspace, and coinciding with the birth of new musical movements such as hyperpop. And on the mainstream charts, artists such as Dua Lipa and The Weeknd pull sounds from the 70s and 80s to craft their respective hits. It appears that this trend has now almost caught up to our present moment, with the late-2010s being the latest craze. Rather than exploring how the Tumblr years have taken hold in the cultural imagination however, I am more interested in why this may be the case.

With the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, pop culture itself has appeared to have reached a state of stagnation. The Artist, that singular figure with an identifiable persona and a cohesive body of work, appears to have diminished in prominence over the years. Instead, apps such as Tik Tok now dictate music trends, and songs are designed with the algorithm in mind — they must be quick to grab one’s attention. This isn’t wholly a negative thing, but it has contributed to a rather fragmented and indiscernible era in the history of pop culture. Paired with the uncertain and rather stressful nature of this contemporary moment, it makes sense then that people reach back into the past for something with which they can identify — something warm, comforting, and familiar. For many people who grew up in 2014, the era carries a feeling of simplicity with it, the sort of fondness with which many look back on. That’s not to say that Tumblr was a singularly positive place — it did tend to glamorize mental illness and substance abuse — but revisiting the past, often with rose-colored glasses, has proven to be fruitful for many.

While the resurgence of Tumblr culture has proven to be popular aesthetically, whether or not this will translate into a broader revival of certain musical trends remains to be seen. Several of the era’s biggest musical acts, such as Arctic Monkeys and Sky Ferreira, are poised to make a comeback after years of silence. Will they revisit the sounds of the past, appeasing their core demographic, or will they pursue new sonic avenues? Others, such as Charli XCX, are planning to pay homage to the era in different ways: the artist has revealed plans to play shows commemorating the 10th anniversary of her debut album, True Romance.

It makes sense that in times of crisis, we tend to reach for the past. Seeing the so-called “indie sleaze” revival underway has undeniably filled me with joy — I’d be lying if I said I didn’t still listen to The Neighbourhood’s debut album on a regular basis, reminiscing about the time I first discovered their music via an 8tracks playlist. Given the cyclical nature of trends however, and the fact that we seem to be reaching a plateau of sorts related to nostalgia, wherein the past has almost caught up to the future, I can’t help but wonder: what’s next?

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**“WITH THE ONSET OF THE COVID-19
PANDEMIC, POP CULTURE ITSELF
HAS APPEARED TO HAVE REACHED
A STATE OF STAGNATION”**

Billy Strings

New Legacy on Bluegrass

Thomas Sider

It's no grand claim to say that music appreciation is largely determined by generation. Each decade—in mainstream pop, at least—has been generalized to probably an unfair extent by most listeners. The categorization is so entrenched that it's, weirdly, even become redemptive (“Hate boomer politics but The Beatles slap”). Looking at it from the opposite perspective, there's the cliché that past generations often look at their children's music as nothing more than noise. This initial repugnance might develop into some slight fondness, maybe even a liking, the more they're forced to listen. Rarely, however, do you see a young artist win the hearts of an older generation and only later seep into the day to day listening of teens and twenty-somethings. Here, Billy Strings seems to be the exception. Billy won the 2021 Grammy for Best Bluegrass Album with *Home*, and it was around this time that his popularity began to rise, with a top 100 spot on Billboard 200 on his next album *Renewal* and [performances on Jimmy Kimmel](#). Reel back the years, just four or five, and find Billy performing in small town music halls and chapels to layers of fold-up chairs and pews seating Boomers and Gen Xs.

It's not hard to see why these older generations fall for Billy. Billy is a break from Drake and Post.

“Good to see some of the younger generation keep the older generation living.”

Billy shows how bluegrass still shines in an electric world. “GOOD GOD ALMIGHTY THIS BOY CAN PICK!!!!” Billy stands for wholesome Appalachian values, is a true progenitor, incarnation even, of bluegrass legend Doc Watson. “We've lost Doc but gained Billy...I can't tell you how good this sounds here in the mountains of West Virginia.”

[To them at least](#). Billy is all of these things, but limiting him to such descriptions undersells him as an artist. Billy, in reality, is part of a tradition of innovators. The mandolinist Sam Bush and banjoist Bela Fleck had formed the progressive bluegrass band New Grass Revival in 1971. Just a few years earlier Jerry Garcia was shaking off his bluegrass roots to form the Grateful Dead, from which you can still hear those roots in songs like “Ripple,” “Dire Wolf,” and the cover “Goin' Down the Road Feeling Bad.” If you look at Billy's albums, you see how he becomes more and more involved in this tradition. Early albums like *Billy Strings* and *Fiddle Tune X* are faithful to old recordings of bluegrass legends and yet are deceptively original, while *Turmoil and Tinfoil* and *Home* steadily blend this faithfulness with heavy metal and psychedelic rock. Listening to this progression, it's no surprise to see Billy perform with Sam, Bela, and Grateful Dead drummer Bill Kreutzman in recent years.



During a celebration of Doc Watson's music, Billy relates how Doc, still playing in bands in Appalachia, was discovered by musicologist Ralph Rinzler, who convinced him to travel to New York City where his popularity skyrocketed: Doc realized that bluegrass "is not some family hokey thing...he thought everyone was into Elvis and stuff, he didn't think anyone wanted to hear banjo music." From Billy's perspective, bluegrass's introduction to the pop music scene was an invitation into something new. For Doc, bluegrass was just "what he did with his family," but for Billy, Doc showed New York the light. Where many find an uncovering of a preserved tradition, a chisel blasting away at a fossil, Billy finds a rebirth, sharing Doc's transition to stardom through performance as if to say, "it was always new, always innovating." It is this innovation that might ask the older generation to remove the rose-coloured glasses they use to ogle at Billy's revival of their beloved mountain music—that might strain their view of the genre as static.

Billy, while reasonably acclaimed for his guitar-playing above all, goes under-recognized as a lyricist: a main draw for me listening to Billy for the first time was his ability to construct elaborate and simple imagery, and, more importantly, always seeming to do so humbly. The more Billy pulls away from traditional bluegrass, the more his lyrics hone a sense of the present's fight with nostalgia, mirroring that older audience's battle between old and new. Home is replete with such anxieties. The album's two hits, "Watch It Fall" ("It's not so easy now but it never was back then") and "Away From The Mire" ("Remember the time, we were both eye to eye and we both knew the reasons why it seemed like we faced the world on our own"), open with ambivalent visions of the past. Meanwhile "Freedom," the album's closing track, is a more focused attempt at holding on to the old while doing something new. [As Billy said in an interview with Relix](#): "This song almost sounds like an old bluegrass gospel thing, except we're not talking about Jesus; we're talking about other stuff." The instrumentals of these songs coupled with the earnest recollection of the lyrics reveal this tension between a complicated past and facing the inevitability of moving beyond it, an inevitability we find both hopeful and regretful.



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Earlier in the Relix interview, Billy discusses, "Hollow Heart," which he describes as "a good old bluegrass song in G—not so progressive, not so psychedelic." Billy says the song is about a toxic relationship before immediately describing his high school metal days as a neglectful break from his bluegrass roots. This preoccupation with unrequited love seems to perfectly describe the bluegrass tradition, whose adherents are caught between a similarly toxic back and forth between innovation and digging roots. Billy's artistry is epitomized by this push and pull found across his songs and performances, and nothing better exemplifies these tugs of war than his draw of the older bluegrass audience.

If you've never heard of Billy Strings, and have no clue what I'm talking about but somehow managed to read the whole article anyway, watch [this 2019 video](#) (filmed in 2012) of a 19-year-old Billy, "in a quiet room at a loud party," tearing up perhaps his most famous song.

credits

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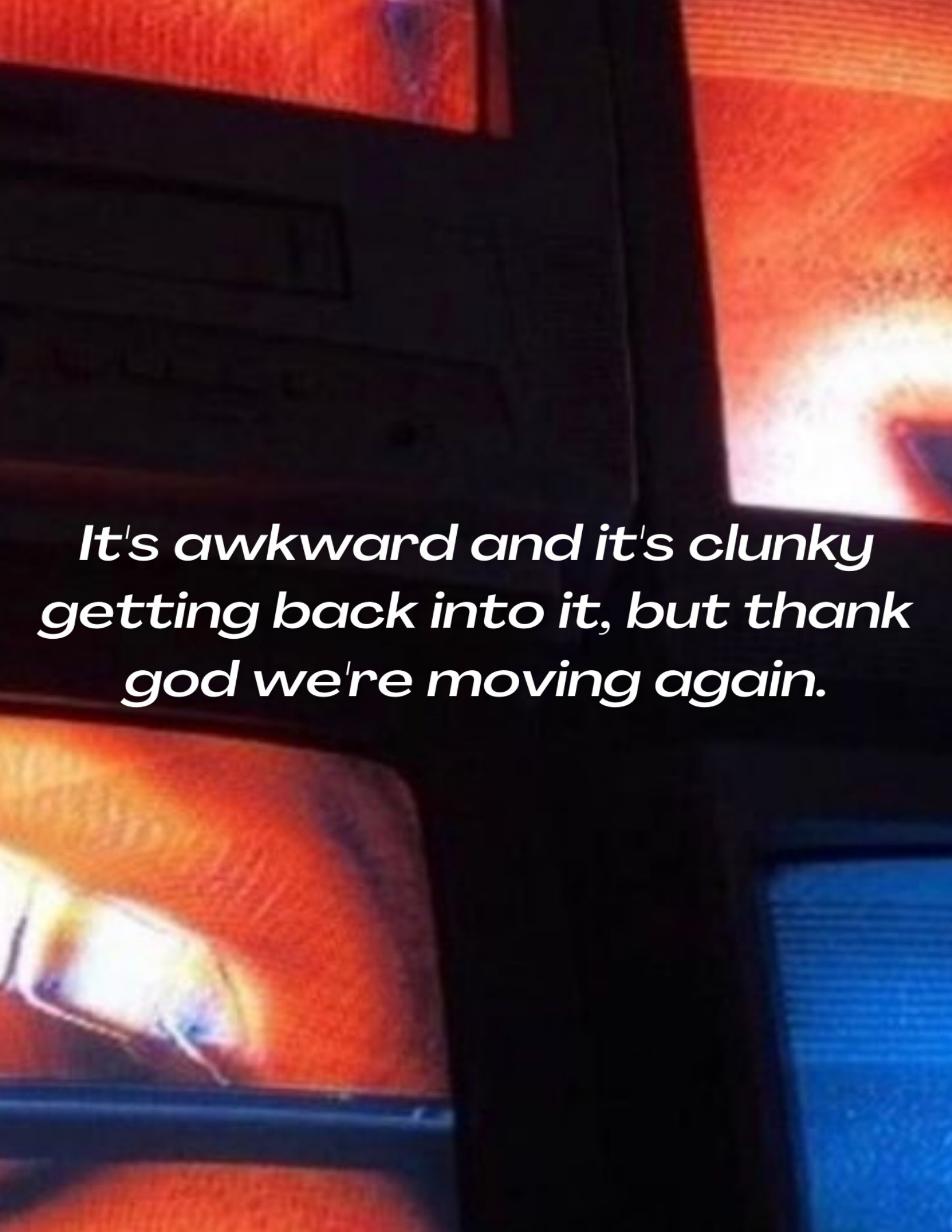
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*It's awkward and it's clunky
getting back into it, but thank
god we're moving again.*



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